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ABSTRACT

The Arlington, Washington, School District--a mostly rural district with enrollment of 2,790--conducted a survey of its public using both blanket mailing and random sampling procedures in order to compare the views of the total population with the views of the typically small percentage who mail back a questionnaire. The questionnaire contained 29 items assessing public attitudes toward public schools. Returns for the blanket mailing numbered 620 (14.8%). Returns for the random sample numbered 102 (89.5%). Three groups were identified: randomly sampled parents, parents who elected to return the questionnaire, and non-parents who elected to return the questionnaire. On the average, 4.8% of the parents who voluntarily mailed back the questionnaire were more critical of the job Arlington Schools were doing than were the sampled parents. Mail-in parents were also more concerned about education than other parents as indicated by the fact that 44% were willing to support a tax increase compared to 34% of the sampled group. Differences ranged from 18.4% of mail-in parents more critical (on getting enough arithmetic instruction) to 6.0% of sampled parents more critical (on the item asking if local students had too many rights and privileges today). Non-parents mailing in the questionnaire were the most critical group. (JHZ)

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THE BIAS OF MAIL-IN RETURNS IN A COMMUNITY SURVEY

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THE BIAS OF MAIL-IN RETURNS IN A COMMUNITY SURVEY

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Many school districts send out questionnaires in blanket mailings in order to assess public attitudes about various local school issues. When the return rate is low, as it usually is, the question arises, "How biased are the results--how do they distort the views of the total population, which consists of more nonrespondents than respondents?"

An attempt to answer this question was made when the Arlington, Washington, School District, a mostly rural district with enrollment of 2790, conducted a survey of its public using both blanket mailing and random sampling procedures. The blanket mailing was used for a variety of reasons, not least of which was public relations. The questionnaire sent out contained 29 items, most taken from various Gallup Polls of the Public Attitudes Toward the Public Schools.[1] Returns numbered 620, 14.8% of the total sent out. Before this mailing, however 114 randomly sampled parents received a special mailing of the same questionnaire, and community volunteers went to the homes to retrieve those that were not mailed back. Although some of those sampled could not be located or did not respond for other reasons, 102 or 89.5% of the questionnaires from this group were retrieved.

These procedures identified three groups: randomly-sampled parents, parents who elected to return the questionnaire, and non-parents who elected to return the questionnaire. (Parents and non-parents were distinguished by an item on the questionnaire; non-parents were exluded from the random sample because no suitable enumeration of this population was available.)

Thirteen items on the questionnaire implied a rating of how good a job the Arlington Schools were doing. On the average for these items, 4.8% of the parents who mailed back the questionnaire were more critical than the sampled parents. (Table 1) As examples, 51% of the sampled parents rated the local schools A or B compared to 44% of the mail-ins; 49% of the sampled parents thought discipline was not strict enough compared to 56% of the mail-ins; and 45% of the sampled parents believed that their children were getting a better education than they did compared to 30% of the mail-ins. The differences in the percentages ranged from 18.4% of mail-in parents more critical (on getting enough arithmetic instruction) to 6.0% sampled parents more critical (on the item asking if local students had too many rights and privileges today).

While the mail-in parents were more critical than the sampled parents, they were not as critical as the non-parents who returned the questionnaire. For instance, the percentage of non-parents who graded the school A or B dropped to 36% in this group; and only 25% thought that children were receiving a better education today.

Aside from showing differences between samples, the survey provided information of, some use and occasional encouragement to the school district. For instance, about half the parents in both samples indicated their child liked school "very much" (rather than "somewhat" or "very little"), and over two-thirds of them felt the curriculum met the needs of their child.

One variation of a Gallup poll item was a split of the one asking about instruction in the basics into three separate items for reading, writing and arithmetic. Of the three basic skills, writing received the largest "not

enough" instruction response (56% and 50% of the two parent samples) with reading close behind (49% of both parent groups). Arithmetic elicited a markedly different result with 65% of the sampled parents and 47% of the mail-in parents giving the "enough" response. The last time a national sample was asked this question, 61% of the parents indicated there was not enough instruction in all three basic skill areas. In the Arlington mail-in, non-parents were much more likely to give a critical response to this item; and it was here that the difference between parents and non-parents was most pronounced.

Factors other than the volition of the respondents, such as the slight time lag between mailings, could account for differences between samples and cannot be completely ruled out, even if they are not especially plausible explanations. Notwithstanding this qualification, the picture that emerged from Arlington was that the parent who takes the time to mail back the questionnaire is inclined to be both more critical and more concerned than other parents--more concerned as indicated by 44% willing to support a tax increase compared to 34% of the sampled group. Trying to estimate a bias in mail-in returns from a blanket survey is speculative business at best, but if the Arlington results give any clue, it is to estimate the bias as almost 5% more critical.

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[1]PACE Manual, Phi Delta Kappan, Bloomington, Indiana.

TABLE I

PERCENTAGES OF THREE GROUPS GIVING SPECIFIED RESPONSES
TO SELECTED ITEMS IN LOCAL SCHOOL SURVEY

ITEM (Abbreviated)	RESPONSE	% MAILBACK PARENTS (N=353)	% SAMPLED PARENTS (N=102)	POSITIVE DIFFERENCES SP OVER MP	% MAILBACK NON-PARENTS (N=267)
Attention to Reading	Enough	44.9	45.9	1.5	9.5
Attention to Writing	Enough	35.4	43.9	8.5	13.8
Attention to Arithmetic	Enough	46.9	65.3	18.4	20.1
Teacher Qualifications Today	Better or Same	56.3	64.0	7.7	50.9
Quality of Civics Instruction	Fair or Poor	72.9	74.2	- 1.3	79.1
Strictness of Discipline	Not Strict Enough	56.0	48.9	7.1	54.9
Student Privileges	Too Many	32.0	38.0	- 6.0	38.1
Education Today vs. Yesterday	Better Today	29.7	45.1	15.4	25.2
Opinion Change, Local Schools	Less Favorable	30.0	25.5	4.5	39.1
Grading of Arlington Schools	A or B	44.4	50.5	6.1	36.2
Child Enjoys School?	Very Much	47.5	45.1	- 2.6	
Individual Attention to Child	Sufficient	66.0	64.7	- 1.3	
Curriculum & Child's Ed. Needs	Meets Needs	67.2	71.6	4.4	
Average Percent				4.8	